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Tuesday, January 31, 2006

Death by government

Should we be more worried about death by terrorist, or death by government? Matthew White and R.J. Rummel put our current hysteria in perspective.

Posted by Nick Szabo at 8:18 PM

4 comments:

Mike Huben said...

Plainly we should be more worried about death from capitalism and other freedom. Cigarettes alone are killing roughly 3 million per year worldwide, far in excess of terrorism or despotic governments. Add in malarial deaths due to resistant mosquitos (which are caused by unregulated spraying endorsed by chemical companies) and you get an astronomical total.

Governments actually, on balance, kill far fewer than they save through sanitation, vaccination, clean water, and smallpox

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Nick Szabo

"A premier thinker about history, law and economics, and the lessons they have for security." -- Adam Shostack, Emergent Chaos

"Szabo comes out with these essays that leave me in awe." -- Brian Dunbar

"Reading material that is eclectic, challenging and endlessly fascinating." -- Sean McGrath, Propylon

"Like most blogs worth my attention, this blog is updated only infrequently. That is because the authors of blogs worth my attention only post when they have something to say that is true, relevant and not already known by their audience. Most of the human race does not have the skill to know when an idea has these three properties. The skill is particularly rare in the fields of politics and economics, which is why this blog is such a rare and valuable thing." -- Richard Hollerith

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eradication. But single-minded ideologues such as Rummel don't want you to think about this.

You might enjoy spending a little time with The Global Burden Of Disease to undertand just how silly that false dilemma is.

2:48 PM

Zooko said...

Yes. There are two basic attitudes to take:

1. Let's gather some data, analyze it, and try to learn from the data.

2. Let's select data to justify our pre-existing beliefs.

Attitude #1 would lead us to think about disease, poverty, war (for the globe as a whole), or about cancer, heart disease, et al for the developed world:

http://www.cdc.gov/nchs/fastats/deaths.htm

To be fair, Nick and the other posters haven't really said "Government is the biggest problem" or "Government is a bigger problem than heart disease", but rather "Government is a bigger problem than terrorism".

Even if true, this inequality means little since the smaller quantity is so small.

9:39 AM

Nick Szabo said...

As usual, Mike ignores the shocking reality that shows the evil of his adorations -- that governments, primarily socialist governments undertaking the the kinds of projects that Mike adores, have murdered people by the millions -- by changing the topic to something only tangentially related. If a mass murderer also worked by day as a surgeon, that wouldn't exculpate the murderer for his evil deeds.

Disease is also a non-sequitur as my comparison was about the security threats posed by governments versus the security threats posed by terrorism. But even if we follow Mike in changing the topic to disease, as usual following Mike's line of reasoning quickly leads one into absurdity. Mosquitos are the fault of capitalism and freedom? Would Mike have us believe that the rate of death from malaria in, say, North Vietnam was lower than that in South Vietnam, due to some magic that occurs when the government plans the economy in detail? Perhaps Mike also believes that life expectancy is longer in North Korea than in South Korea?

Interestingly, terrorists share with governments the prediliction to mix violence and charity. Hamas is a good example of that -- they won their recent election presumably not so much from their suicide bombings as for the high praise they won among Palestinians for providing health care and charity services that the Palestinian government under Fatah was not providing. Hamas' creditable charity does not justify its murder spree; no more do the good deeds somtimes performed by governments justify their terrible history of mass murder.

Furthermore, the good deeds performed by Hamas do not lessen the security threat from Hamas. If anything, they increase it -- since, in the minds of people like Mike, their evil deeds are justified
by their goods ones, their evil deeds are more likely to be encouraged and committed. The same for governments -- the security threat from governments increases the more their evil acts are justified by their goods ones.

There's no doubt that some governments have sometimes provided some useful health services -- where did you see me denying that? Still, when sanitation, clean water, etc. have been provided by government these services have depended on technology usually developed by capitalists and tax money paid by a wealthy capitalist economy. Indeed, it was the ultra-capitalist 18th and 19th

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century British, who Mike must utterly loathe, who were the main pioneers in public sanitation. Furthermore, these services often also have been directly provided by private entities. Almost all the water I drink, for example, is privately provided, and is far cleaner than the "government" tap water (really the government is just funnelling tax money to private contractors who provided the tap water, although various corrupt entites also manage to siphon off much of this -- the money, not the water). Mike also fails to mention that these utilities are also often used as means of political control, as for example Israeli control of water is used against Jordanians and Palestinians. Does Mike have numbers proving that government saves lives more efficiently in these areas than equivalent private entities, or is this just more ideological steam?

11:08 AM

Mike Huben said...

Nick, do you realize how rude it is to use your libertarian psychic powers to reveal my private adorations to the world? I've been trying to keep my shrine to statist murder secret, and now you've blabbed it.

Zooko, I agree with your preferred metho. But please don't minimize the propaganda effect of false dichotomies such as terrorist vs government. First, there is the association effect. But worse, there's the effect of systematically diverting attention from still other favored alternatives. Rummel is particularly annoying in this respect.

The basic problem Rummel has is ridiculed in my Libertarianism In One Lesson: The best multi-party democratic republics should be equated to the worst dictatorships for the purposes of denouncing statism. It's only a matter of degree.

Nick plays along with that game by cleverly confusing socialism with communism. The important difference here is that communism has private ownership of government by a political party. It's the private ownership of government that's the problem, not the socialist means of production. That's why you don't hear so much about "democide" in the socialist Scandanavian nations, but do hear about "democide" in nations which are privately owned by dictators and their parties.

Nick also claims I'm switching the subject to disease, but of course the subject here is causes of death, be they terrorism, government, capitalism, or disease. I don't really see why I should respect some false dichotomy and limit myself to the first two. And once again, Nick accuses me of absurdity when he is simply showing that he's unawares of current affairs outside his field. Here, Nick, follow this link: Worst Crime.

Nick also talks about terrorists and governments mixing violence and charity. Of course, so does private enterprise. While he's hailing the "ultra-capitalist 18th and 19th century British", he seems to forget that period of empire was run to benefit private corporations such the the British East India Company.

But even granting that there is good and bad in government, and indeed in any human creation, nobody sensible would simply damn them all without some utilitarian calculation. Should we do without cars because there are 40,000 US automotive deaths a year?

Nick says "the security threat from governments increases the more their evil acts are justified by their goods ones." [sic] That's a nice assertion, with no backing. I don't really know of anybody who justifies evil acts by good acts. Usually evil acts are justified with a claim of good effects. That's because they're not tied together, and one can be reduced without reducing the other.

Private water systems have a very bad history of serving the poor. This creates huge disease problems, even if the well-off have their own clean water. The modern bottled-water industry is a nasty example of this sort of thing: prices for the water are frequently higher than the price of gasoline when you buy individual portions.

5:14 PM

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